

Sky News
Australian Agenda
United States Ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich
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Interview with Jeffrey Bleich

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Peter van Onselen:

Joining us live out of Canberra we have the US Ambassador to Australia, Mr Jeffrey Bleich. Mr Ambassador, thanks very much for your company.

Jeffrey Bleich:

Thanks for having me on, Peter, and nice to see you again, Paul.

Peter van Onselen:

Let me ask you straight up, Barack Obama has been re-elected, you're well-known to be very close to the President, what does this mean chiefly for Australia-US relations going forward over the next four years?

Jeffrey Bleich:

Well, I think one thing it means is that I don't have to start packing immediately and so I'm looking forward to being able to stay here for a while and I know my family feels the same way. In terms of the overall architecture of the US-Australia relationship I think one of the great things is that it doesn't really matter who's elected, whether it's a Democrat or a Republican in the White House or whether it's Labor, Liberal, National Coalition leader in the Parliament. We always seem to make progress together and that has been because we're not basing our relationship on partisan issues, we're basing it upon enduring values relating to how we view the world. Those are focused on things like open markets, free trade, freedom of expression, democracy. Those sort of elements are things that bind us together and those aren't going to change between political parties.

Peter van Onselen:

Were you surprised in the end by the size of the victory? I realise that it was close in a number of states but ultimately that added up to a pretty sizeable win on the electoral college votes for the President. Did that surprise you?

Jeffrey Bleich:

We always knew it was going to be a very closely run race but in general races tend to break one way or another as you get closer and closer to the final days of voting. The reason undecided voters are so prized is because they really stay undecided until just as they're about to enter into the ballot box, and that's why there is that intense politicking and campaigning at the very end of an election cycle. So I can't say that I was stunned that it broke one way because we've seen this happen in the past.

Paul Kelly:

Ambassador, we've got a very important meeting coming up in Perth, the AUSMIN meeting. I'd like to refer you to the comments made by the senior American official, Kurt Campbell, indicating the Obama administration has worries about the cuts to the Australian defence budget. How concerned is the administration about those cuts?

Jeffrey Bleich:

Well I know Kurt Campbell well and I know that he doesn't have worries about the budget. I think those statements that he made, that you may be referring to, may have been misinterpreted. What he said was that when we get together we always talk about budgets, we always talk about defence budgets because they help us determine what our priorities are. This is an annual meeting that we have every year where we get together, bring our Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense together with the Defence Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, and we talk about what our opportunities are and what our priorities are, and so obviously budgets are going to be part of that. And he said that was important but no more so than in any other year.

Paul Kelly:

But the Australian defence budget has been very significantly cut, so let me ask you directly, surely the United States has some concerns or worries about that?

Jeffrey Bleich:

No, you know we actually don't. We do trust one another. I think there have been periods where the US has had to make adjustments in its own defence spending and I think our allies always have shown confidence in us that no matter what our budget

demands are we're always going to meet our obligations to our allies and also maintain the security needs of the United States. We've seen that in Australia, year after year they've done the same thing. So we understand there are going to be these adjustments in budgets year to year but in terms of the commitments we hear the same thing from Australia that we've always heard: they will meet their commitment to us as allies and they are also committed to ensuring the security of Australia.

Peter van Onselen:

Mr Ambassador, can I ask you the reports over the weekend in relation to the Coalition considering the use of nuclear submarines by the Australian navy, is that something that the US would provide, I guess, what you might call nuclear support of were that to be a policy road that the Coalition took Australia after the next election?

Jeffrey Bleich:

You know, this is one of those topics that keeps coming up and as far as I can tell it's an idea to speculate about but it is so far away from ever being a serious policy consideration for a variety of reasons. First, politically there hasn't been a real momentum for the development of a nuclear energy program at all let alone nuclear submarines in Australia, and unless you've got that kind of infrastructure, unless you've got people who are trained and really understand nuclear energy it's very, very difficult to maintain any sort of other nuclear industries. I think that's probably where the conversation would have to begin and that's an issue for Australia not for the United States. To the extent that Australia were ever interested in developing nuclear capabilities for its energy industry, other things, then we could start having that conversation at that point.

Paul Kelly:

It's also been reported, ambassador, in the context of the decision by the two governments to rotate those 2,500 US Marines through the Northern Territory, that the Australian Government on the eve of the visit by President Obama started to get cold feet about that and wanted to rethink and reassess the policy. To what extent was the United States concerned about those last-minute doubts held by the Australian Government?

Jeffrey Bleich:

Well, in the first place we generally don't get into the business of talking about what internal discussions were, but let me say we never had any doubt that this was going to move forward. So whatever people are talking about in terms of cold feet, you know, we never felt that chill. No-one rubbed their feet on us I guess will be the way to say it, because there was just no indication as we were getting closer and closer to the final points of this agreement that there would be any impediment to accomplishing it in time for the President's arrival, which I think had been our common goal.

Peter van Onselen:

Mr Ambassador, I just wanted to move back on to electoral politics for a moment if I could. I saw it reported that you were interested in, or supportive of, the compulsory voting model that Australia has as opposed to the non-compulsory model that most of the world has. And as, I guess, an Australian political scientist it's interesting to see someone like yourself take that view because internationally it's quite uncommon for other parts of the world to support the Australian model yet we here consider it a pretty good one generally. What is it that leads you to have a supportive attitude towards compulsory voting as opposed to the system that exists now in the United States?

Jeffrey Bleich:

Well, you know, I haven't said that we should adopt compulsory voting but I do think that it's worth looking at because there's some real advantages that we've seen here that would address some of the concerns that people have expressed about voting in the US. You know, the main opposition that I hear to compulsory voting from my friends in America is that you can't tell people to vote, it's just not the American way, and this is a voluntary choice. But in the United States if you want - everyone has to appear for jury duty and if you don't show up for jury duty you get fined, and it's very similar to the system that we have here in Australia for voting which is if you don't show up and turn in a ballot, whether you fill in the ballot or not, you can get a fine. So I think the argument in the US would be, well, if jury duty is one of those obligations of citizenship that you're required to do in order to be a proper citizen why wouldn't voting, the most essential aspect of being a member of a democracy, also have that same rule? I think it's worth our looking at.

In terms of the effect it has, I think the attractive aspects of getting more people to vote is it takes a lot of the money out of politics, you don't have to slice and dice the demographics; you aren't trying to target single issue voters, you need to speak to the entire public as opposed to individual sets of voters in one county or another. By doing that I think you maybe raise the level of debate a bit and also take some of the money out which are two of the things that you hear as perennial complaints about our current campaign system which goes on so long and is so expensive.

So for those reasons I think there's value in at least looking at how Australia has done this. I'll give you one last quick anecdote which is I had mentioned this to a friend back in the States and they said, well we pioneered democracy and the election process, and

I said yeah but we've learned stuff from Australia in the past. In fact the secret ballot used to be called the Australian ballot back in the United States because we didn't have secret ballots at first. You would just take your vote, hand it to someone, they'd read it aloud and stick it in a box, and if people didn't like how you voted they may, you know, beat you up in the parking lot afterwards. So thanks for the secret ballot there Australia.

Paul Kelly:

In the last couple of days the Prime Minister has said that President Obama is one of the world leaders who've raised with her her famous speech where she attacked Tony Abbott as a misogynist and as a sexist. Do you know if it's correct that President Obama congratulated the Prime Minister on that speech?

Jeffrey Bleich:

No, and in fact I am familiar with the Prime Minister's comments and what she said was that she wasn't going to talk about anything they discussed and I think she was asked a question about whether or not he was aware of the speech and she said, "I think it's fair to say that he was aware of it". But whether or not they discussed it or not is not a - nothing that she's talked about and certainly we don't talk about their conversations.

Paul Kelly:

Do you know what his own reaction to the speech is?

Jeffrey Bleich:

No, I'd say I don't. I don't.

Peter van Onselen:

Can I just ask you, Ambassador, on this issue there's been plenty of discussion about what, if any, implications from the US result might be able to be drawn here in Australia, both in terms of the demographic make-up of the way people voted and some of the issues in the mix. Do you see any points of comparison?

Jeffrey Bleich:

You know our election system is very, very different, as we were just discussing, between the United States and Australia, and also every election is a little bit different. If you just look at the concerns that people had four years ago in 2008 when we were in the midst of the global financial crisis and deeply enmeshed in Iraq and sort of on the back foot in Afghanistan, there are a very different set of issues this time round so it's hard to compare apples to oranges.

On the other hand, I think one thing that I was able to be a little bit more philosophical about watching my own election from abroad was the importance of people understanding that government matters; government is good. It can be used for bad purposes but that in the end every great society has a strong government, a strong business sector, a strong educational and non-profit institutions, and that these are essential elements of any stable society. The more the political parties find that they get benefit from just putting down governments, saying government can't solve problems the more the public starts to think maybe if everyone in government seems to think that it can't work why should I be trusting it. I think it's important for us to protect the brand of government and let people see the good things that it does and how much has

been accomplished with good governments, and occasionally, you know, remind people what countries with poor governments really look like, or absent governments really look like, and they are not places that most of us would want to live.

Paul Kelly:

Talking about effective government let's just go briefly to fiscal cliff issue. The President will now direct his attention to this. Our own Treasurer Wayne Swan has said that if this issue is not resolved the consequences will be catastrophic for the global economy. What's your own assessment about the President's capacity and the capacity of the United States' political system to resolve this?

Jeffrey Bleich:

You know, I have confidence that the fiscal cliff will be averted for a whole variety of reasons, but the main one is that Congress created this fiscal cliff precisely because they needed something that was such a terrible default that they couldn't accept it, so they created this Sword of Damocles to hang over their head as a default to force them to make some decisions that are hard decisions for them to make. So in the first place they recognise that this would have calamitous effects for not only our economy and other economies that are important to us but also for our security. I think that's the first reason. The second reason is that we have a historic opportunity at this point where you have a divided government. It's much easier to make this kind of a choice when you've got Republican control of the House and Democrat control of the White House and Democrat control with a filibuster thread by the Republicans in the Senate, those actually help you navigate what is very treacherous waters for both political parties. The Democrats have to allow some reforms of entitlements that they had previously objected to and Republicans are going to have to agree to revenue measures that they have previously said they wouldn't do. So both sides have to do it at the same time and

I think a divided government actually creates an opportunity for this president. Then I think there is just the fact that you've got a brand new president and that creates its own momentum and no-one is going to wait someone out for four years and so they know this the time to do it when you're still far away from the next election. Then finally I think the markets really won't tolerate a long, long delay in resolving our budget issues and creating a sustainable path for reducing our deficit. And if you do all that, frankly, I think your foreign minister was right when he said, you know, we're one budget deal away from fully restoring the strength of the US economy. We are spring loaded for a very, very good recovery but we need to get through this impasse first.

Peter van Onselen:

US Ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich, thanks very much for joining us on the program. We're certainly glad that you're going to be here for another four years, we hope that we can have you back. Thank you.

Jeffrey Bleich:

Great. Thank you very much, Peter, thank you, Paul.